A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism

Bobby S. Sayyid
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A Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism uses critical theory to examine the Islamists' political projects and their depictions. Scholars are divided between those who believe in a religious or national essence to the Muslim community (essentialists) and those who reject this assumption (anti-essentialists). In regards to a Muslim essence, Sayyid identifies two existing scholarly camps: Orientalists assume an ahistorical, acontextual Islamic essence that drives and shapes Muslim society and activity through most places and ages. Anti-Orientalists, as manifested in such writers as Hamid El-Zien, assert that there is not one "Islam," but only many "Islams." According to this view, Islam and indeed all religion

cannot exist as an analytic category having a self-sustaining, positive, fixing, universal, and autonomous content; rather, religion is only manifested through particular contexts.

While acknowledging an intellectual debt to Edward Said, whose critiques fed the anti-Orientalist camp, Sayyid argues for a middle path between Orientalist and anti-Orientalist understandings. Orientalists claim that the relationship between Islam and Islamism is direct, whereas anti-Orientalists claim that the relationship is merely opportunistic – Islam is what Marxists might call "superstructural" (a surface action over deeper, more real material contests) and is driven by a false consciousness.

Picking theoretical fruit from writers who explored signs, ideas, and language, among them Slavoj Zizek, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Lacan, the author asks Zizek's general question: "What creates and sustains the identity of a given ideological field beyond all possible variations of its ideological content?" (p. 44). Analysts typically find themselves unable to answer this question without reasserting a new Orientalism. Sayyid asserts that despite the malleability of Islamic symbols and Islamist programs, Islam has retained its *specificity*, a term by which he means the traces of its original meaning articulated at the foundation, traces that have been invoked repeatedly. Islam is a crucial nodal point, à la Jacques Lacan, retrospectively giving meaning to other elements, be they Sufi discussions, debates on *fiqh*, or other discourses (p. 45).

Sayyid argues that the relationship between Islam and Islamists is constitutive: Both are transformed as Islamists try to articulate Islam in light of their project (p. 46). Islam can hold multiple meanings simultaneously, while retaining its position as *master signifier* (a term Sayyid borrows from sign theory). Within that master signifier, a struggle for nativist authenticity occurs. This produces contested constructions of meaning, which, if they are miniminally acceptable, are enacted in practice by political forces. If there are unconstrained "Islams" proliferating in every place and time, then it would not be necessary to invoke Islam repeatedly. But how successful is this attempt to navigate to a third understanding, one that accepts the anti-Orientalist critique of an Oriental Islamic essence while insisting that Islam matters?

The author claims that the Orientalists are wrong in their simplistic and sometimes racist essentialism, while the anti-Orientalists, by depriving Islam of all positive meaning independent of political whim and exigency, are throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Some will likely critique this work as simply a quilt patched together from disparate sources, each cherry-

picked to better support the author's favored conclusion. But that would be a shallow critique, for the text clearly aims at rigorous transparency and relies on thoroughly detailing its train of logic.

When first presented as a response to the two camps, the statement "Islam matters" stands out rather baldly as an assertion and a polemical response. However, this book represents a serious effort to engage the literature and produce a rationale for this assertion. Despite diverse discourses, Islam has something "that makes people feel that it has something in it" (p. 45). That *itness* is Zizek's real kernel, which escapes signification and unifies and holds members of a community together as long as they believe in it (p. 46). The nation in European societies is an analogue. The community's limit – separating those who belong from those who do not – is contested, yet the nation's *itness* remains.

Sayyid argues that the Kemalist moment in the Muslim world came when master signifiers other than Islam were deliberately chosen. The Islamists, who were created within this context, seek a political order in which Islam is that master signifier. Kemalism become hegemonic after the caliphate was abolished and remained so until the early 1970s. Post-colonial regimes in the Muslim world were Kemalist in that Islam was reduced from master signifier to just another element in the political order (Sayyid finds *Kemalist* to be more specific than *secular*, *modernizing*, or *nationalist*, all of which are other commonly applied labels).

Kemalist authority is now in crisis, and Islamism is the main beneficiary. The great antidote to Kemal's legacy was Khomeini, who, by achieving political power, demonstrated that Islamism could be more than just a politically futile articulation of protest. Not coincidentally, Islamism's rise has accompanied the erosion of Eurocentrism and the "global process of the provincialization of Europe" (p. 155). Eurocentrism is a project struggling to maintain its political-cultural hegemony, and Europe is becoming less exceptional, less the undisputed development model. This perceptual and tangible shift marks a more level playing field for political contestation between and among global actors.

In these times, nation-building has become an accepted policy activity. If the European nation is an analogue to the Muslim religious community, and Napoleon could intentionally seek to build French national identity, why not *build* religion and manipulate its political consequences? Surely political leaders and revolutionaries would like to transform religious meaning in ways that further their goals. Even fundamentalists are often innovators, who introduce novel interpretations into traditional religion.

They cannot be assumed to follow the Shari`ah only, despite their early rhetoric.

Sayyid's work implies that there are limits to such intentional manipulation. His language is a little cluttered and can be hard to follow. To be fair, however, rendering linguistic and semantic theory intelligible to the non-specialist is a difficult task and may lend itself to such density. This slim volume packs complex reflections, and sets out on a journey that takes the reader through many theoretical islands. The author is erudite and can be sardonic, even polemical, thus livening up the reader's experience.

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